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Voice

Common Questions and Answers

***Q** My employee complains that he has a sleep disorder and, consequently, has trouble getting to work on time. He excitedly talks about what his doctor is doing for him, but I don't see any progress. Is this an EAP matter?*

A An employee with a chronic performance problem may admit to a personal problem and disclose an intervention plan that seems plausible. It can be compelling under such circumstances to postpone an administrative response even as the problem grows worse. Supervisors faced with such employees can feel as though there is no easy answer or next step in attempting to resolve a chronic performance issue. Typically, it is a mistake to accept such a plan outright in lieu of making a supervisory referral to the EAP. Deciding that the EAP is “not necessary” is a diagnostic decision because of the presumption that the employee’s plan is proper. It is better not to judge the employee’s intervention plan. Accept the employee’s answer, but make a referral to the EAP.

***Q** An employee I supervise is a tremendous gossip. The negative effect of his private conversations on morale concerns me. Is it appropriate to refer him to the EAP? How do I document the behavior if I don't witness it?*

A Malicious gossip, rumors, and hearsay can be a destructive force within a work unit or organization. It is natural for supervisors to be concerned about it and its effect on morale. If you do not overhear the gossip, you must rely upon the complaints of others before intervening. The evidence that gossip contributes to morale problems within your workplace may be difficult to measure because its effects may not be clearly or readily seen.

However, if employees complain and are offended, corrective action becomes your responsibility. Direct your attention to behavior you would like changed, but do not label an employee a gossip. Since two people must engage in gossip for it to exist, make it known to employees what standards of civility you expect. After correcting your employee, consider an EAP referral if change is not forthcoming. The EAP may discover other issues or needs that give rise to his behavior.



Helping people lead healthier lives

Q *My employee entered treatment for a drug problem the day before a notice of termination was to be issued. Reportedly, he told coworkers it was to avoid termination. I have put the action on hold, but predict he won't change. What's the chance I will be right?*

A If your employee was insincere upon admission, it does not mean that he will not become sincere after admission. Most people enter treatment to satisfy the demands of others or to avoid the consequences of not doing so. Courts, spouses, doctors, friends and employers all play key roles in pressuring chemically dependent people into treatment. Successful treatment will return to you a renewed, valuable worker. Experience shows that the reason for an employee's admission cannot predict the outcome of treatment. Last-minute decisions to enter treatment are commonly made to avoid the consequences of alcohol or drug-related life problems.

Your organization's decision to hold the job action in abeyance is the right move. This is a powerful time-tested way of helping a chemically dependent worker remain motivated and bounce back as a recovering person. With effective treatment follow up, a supervisor referral to the EAP (if one has not been made), and a contract between you and your employee for satisfactory performance, salvaging this worker is more than likely.

Q *Feeling guilty and sympathetic causes me to shy away from administrative actions I know I should take with troubled employees who aren't making changes. I kick myself every time I do it. Can the EAP help me?*

A The EAP can help you with assertiveness skills needed to manage your employees. Start by seeing employees as responsible for taking charge of their lives and using resources like the EAP to resolve personal problems.

Troubled employees use EAP resources less often when they do not feel accountable for satisfactory performance. You experience guilt when attempting to take appropriate administrative actions because you feel responsible for the adverse effects on the employee that follow. You hesitate to see the employee as responsible for making such an action necessary.

Your view contributes to worsening of performance or conduct problems. To maximize the potential of employees, support them and act earlier to hold them accountable for satisfactory performance. Believe that employees will act in their best interest with such an approach.

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satisfactory performance.*

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***Q** I like a quiet office environment and tend to stay to myself most of the day with the door shut. Some employees think I am too aloof as a supervisor. I tell employees they can interrupt me anytime. Can I help it if they don't speak up? What more can I do?*

A You say that you welcome interruptions by employees at anytime, but they are receiving a nonverbal message from your closed door that you do not like to be interrupted. Assurances that your door is still “open” will not likely change their conditioned response of not interrupting someone behind a closed door.

As a result, employees will bring issues to your attention based upon their degree of importance, and they will eventually feel resentful that you are not proactive with them. Less important and personal concerns will not get the attention they deserve.

A common problem in management is the failure to hear about and intervene with workplace problems early enough to be effective at resolving them. Being aloof—or being seen as aloof—virtually guarantees that you will discover workplace problems later. This will increase the likelihood of a crisis or other loss.

***Q** Our company has a reasonable suspicion policy, but I don't know of any supervisors who have acted on it. If employees test positive, they are referred to the EAP. This is a good thing, so why would supervisors resist acting on the policy?*

A Common reasons supervisors or managers resist acting on an organization's reasonable suspicion policy include:

- fear of harming an employee's reputation;
- denial that the smell of alcohol is real;
- fear of confronting the employee;
- fear of damaging their relationship with the employee;
- fear of personal liability if the test is negative; and,
- concern that the process will not be kept confidential.

Education and training help supervisors overcome resistance associated with these misconceptions.

Reviewing your organization's policy is a good idea. It is easy to overlook behavioral symptoms that can justify a reasonable suspicion test but have no apparent connection with drug or alcohol use. These may include belligerent behavior, problems with coordination, physical appearance, speech problems, confusion, disorientation, and marked swings in mood or emotions. Supervisors often dismiss these symptoms and miss opportunities to arrange reasonable suspicion tests that can help employees and protect the organization.

***Q** In discussions, my employee frequently makes statements that are completely off the topic. Her memory is also poor. She has worked for the company 35 years. Most of us are beginning to work around her. This is just part of getting old, right?*

***Q** I referred five employees over the past year to the EAP, but the EAP told me in each case that the employees had not agreed to the EAP's recommendations. Still, all of these employees are doing great. Why the change if they didn't do what the EAP suggested?*

A Many things, both medical and otherwise, could explain the problems experienced by your employee. When coworkers witness growing communication and memory dysfunction in a fellow worker, they may adapt or find ways of coping. This natural—and enabling—process can unfortunately permit a medical condition, if one exists, to grow worse. Your employee may be exhibiting very early symptoms of a health care problem that affects her cognition, but do not assume it is simply age-related. Make a referral based upon performance issues. The EAP can help determine what the problem is and what resources might assist her.

Awareness of health issues of aging will naturally increase as America ages. This awareness can be a step toward helping valuable workers sooner. However, expect your employee to perform satisfactorily in her job.

A There are several possibilities to explain the successful outcomes (improved productivity) of your employees. 1) Your employees may be practicing self-control over the symptoms of the personal problem that contributed to the unsatisfactory performance. If this is the case, the performance problems may come back. 2) Your employees may have participated in the EAP's recommendations without the EAP's knowledge or in some other form of help that was not recommended by the EAP. 3) The problem identified by the EAP no longer exists.

Whatever the reason for the employees' improved performance, the EAP worked as a service to them and as a tool for improving productivity within your organization.

For assistance, contact your
EAP professional
800.765.0770